



July 8, 2008 -- US spy plane incident with China more serious than reported

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The April 1, 2001, incident between a U.S. Navy EP-3E signals intelligence (SIGINT) aircraft and two Chinese J-8 fighters 70 miles off Hainan island was worst than reported by the media at the time. According to National Security Agency (NSA) sources, the Navy aircraft, after being intercepted by the two Chinese fighters, was forced to land at Lingshui airbase on Hainan by one of the two Chinese aircraft. The other Chinese fighter crashed after it collided with the wing of the EP-3E SIGINT aircraft. The nose and a propeller of the US Navy plane was damaged in the collision.

NSA intercepts of the incident reveal that the plane, piloted by Shane Osborn, who later received the Distinguished Flying Cross for "heroism," did not land at Hainan voluntarily but was forced down by the other Chinese jet. In addition, the EP-3E flight crew was not able to destroy much of the plane's classified equipment and other material because of the threat it would be shot down if the Chinese pilot saw material being thrown from the plane into the South China Sea. [This editor described the standard emergency destruction protocols for aircraft such as the EP-3E and P-3 anti-submarine warfare aircraft on The News Hour with Jim Lehrer on April 3, 2001.](#)

Reports at the time stated that the US Navy plane conducted an emergency landing on Hainan without Chinese authorization. According to the NSA intercepts of Chinese communications, the original story about the unauthorized landing now appears to be false. China retained possession of the "black boxes" from the EP-3E aircraft that would have shown that China demanded the aircraft land on Hainan or be shot down.

Based on NSA intercepts of the event, it now appears that the Chinese not only obtained classified SIGINT and electronic intelligence (ELINT) material but also extremely classified and sensitive cryptographic keying material. In effect, the worst case scenario as described by this editor on The News Hour played out: "if they [the Chinese] got those keys, that means they could decode all past U.S. intelligence, military communications around the world, not just in that area [Southeast Asia] but in other places as well."

The forcing down of the EP-3E aircraft may represent the worst compromise of US classified information since North Korea captured the NSA spy ship, the *USS Pueblo*, on January 23, 1968. In that case, classified information, including cryptographic keying material, ended up in the hands of not only the North Koreans, but the Soviets.

NSA intercepts of the Hainan incident also reveal that before the US crew was released on April 11, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell warned Beijing of U.S. military action against China if it did not immediately release the crew and plane. The plane was later dismantled by a Lockheed Martin crew sent to Lingshui airbase and was flown out on a Russian-built Antonov 124 transport plane.

The Washington Post and *New York Times* hailed George W. Bush's handling of the spy plane incident with China. However, based on the NSA intercepts, the forcing down of the Navy plane with its treasure trove of classified information represented the most damaging compromise of US classified material since 1968. The NSA director at the time, Air Force General Michael Hayden, was promoted to Deputy Director of National Intelligence and Director of the CIA.

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